



# U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Region 7 - Alaska

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News

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## U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Proposes Listing the Spectacled Eider as Threatened

The **spectacled eider**, a large-bodied arctic sea duck that sports a distinctive white eye patch, has declined by as much as 94 percent since 1971 on its primary breeding grounds on Alaska's Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta, leading the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to propose listing the species as "threatened" under the Endangered Species Act (Act). The proposal, published in the May 8, 1992 *Federal Register*, is the first by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to list an animal in Alaska since the Act took effect in 1973.

James G. King of Juneau, Alaska, petitioned the Service in Dec. of 1990 to list two species of eiders that nest in Alaska and Siberia under the Act due to apparent declines in their numbers in western Alaska. After reviewing available population status information during the last year, the Service has determined that the petition to list the spectacled eider is warranted. The Service has also determined that the petition to list the Steller's eider is warranted, but precluded from listing at this time by higher listing priorities.

### *Spectacled Eider*

When the worldwide status of **spectacled eiders** (*Somateria fischari*) was last reviewed twenty years ago, biologist Christian Dau estimated that 48,000 to 70,000 pairs nested along the coast of western Alaska in addition to 3,000 pairs on Alaska's North Slope.

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In 1991 the Service estimated that only 2,700 pairs of spectacled eiders nested on the Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge and few hundred to a few thousand pairs nest in northern Alaska.

Aerial surveys on the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta indicate that these little-known eiders have been declining by 14-19 percent per year since the mid-1980s. No recent information is available from Siberian breeding grounds where 30,000 to 40,000 pairs were thought to breed in the early 1970s.

So far, the causes for the dramatic decline in Alaskan birds have not been identified. No one knows for sure where spectacled eiders spend most of their lives after their brief summers on Alaskan and Siberian tundra breeding grounds.

Eiders have not been recorded among the birds that are accidentally caught in commercial fishery equipment in the Bering Sea or the Gulf of Alaska, and no direct links between the eider decline and commercial fisheries have been identified. Likewise, no incidences of contamination or encounters with oil spills that would have impacted the species have been recorded.

Spectacled eiders nest at low densities across the North Slope. Recent studies have shown that they nest throughout the Prudhoe Bay oilfield in numbers comparable to undeveloped regions farther west on the North Slope.

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These large ducks have been harvested traditionally by Alaskan Natives for food and clothing with no apparent effect on historic populations. Current estimated subsistence harvest in Alaska, based on voluntary reports, is about 300-600 spectacled eiders a year. Efforts are underway to inform coastal Alaskans about the plight of the species and ask them to help the species recover by restricting the harvest until numbers increase.

Since spectacled eiders migrate west from the Alaskan mainland by September, they are found only near St. Lawrence Island during the fall hunting season; therefore, the sport harvest on this species has also been very low. The Service closed the sport hunting season in 1991 as a protective measure.

The Service is planning a satellite telemetry project to investigate whether these arctic ducks spend the winter feeding near the pack ice in the western Bering Sea, as suspected. Further studies would address whether eider mortality has increased due to changes in predation, harvest or food supplies. Also, a sample of spectacled eider eggs will be collected this summer to determine whether the birds are carrying unusual levels of heavy metals or other contaminants.

The public comment period on the proposal to list the spectacled eider as a threatened species will continue until Sept. 8, of 1992. The Service will consider all information received from the public and other agencies before making the final decision to list the species.

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*Steller's Eider*

In the same finding, the Service concludes that although listing the smaller **Steller's eider** (*Polysticta stelleri*) as threatened is warranted, it is precluded from formal listing by other species of higher priority on a national scale. The decision will not affect the Service's increasing efforts to monitor the status of the bird.

Unlike the spectacled eider, this colorful, smaller eider winters primarily in Alaskan waters, where U.S. biologists can observe a large portion of the entire population.

Since 1965, the number of Steller's eiders counted during the Service's fall waterfowl surveys has declined by half or more, but the Service estimates that 70,000 to 100,000 birds are still migrating to Siberia each year to nest. Although Steller's eiders were once widespread they were apparently never abundant breeders in Alaska. They now nest only in the vicinity of Barrow.

The Service plans to expand monitoring efforts for both Steller's and spectacled eider populations, as well as other Alaskan sea ducks.

-FWS-

*Note to Editors:*

*Photographs of both species are available  
at the number listed above.*